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CORINTH IN PREHISTORIC TIMES

THE theory recently advanced by Dr. Walter Leaf¹, that Corinth was not inhabited in Mycenaean times but existed merely as a geographical name designating Acrocorinth, has met with a speedy refutation. Dr. Leaf, arguing in 1914 that no Mycenaean settlement at Corinth was yet known and confidently prophesying that none would ever be found, ventured to identify the Homeric Ephyra with an entirely hypothetical site on a more or less hypothetical river in Sicyonian territory. Recent exploration in the Corinthia, however, has led to the discovery, not of one possible Ephyra, but of a really embarrassing number of claimants to the title. In order to present the prehistoric status of Corinth in its right light and to correct certain mis-statements which have been made, a brief account of the archaeologically established facts is here offered. On the accompanying map (Fig. 1)² each site has been indicated by a number corresponding to that given it below. The following are the prehistoric sites now known in the vicinity of Corinth:

1. At Old Corinth in 1896 on the low hill to the southeast of the square of the modern village a group of rock-cut tombs was discovered³ containing twenty-one vases of a rather primitive type of polished and glazed ware belonging to the Early Helladic Period.⁴ Farther to the west the hill on which stands the temple of Apollo consists in part of prehistoric deposit, some of it still lying in its stratified sequence. Both to the north and south of the temple potsherds have been found, including considerable quantities of neolithic as well as Early and Middle Helladic wares. Likewise in the eastern part of the agora in 1915 a pocket filled with sherds of glazed ware (Early Helladic) was excavated. Thus it is clear that already from remote prehistoric times a settlement surrounded the hollow in which flowed the spring that, as

¹ *Homer and History*, pp. 209 ff.; *Cl. R.* XXXII, 1918, p. 87.

² The map is based on the British Admiralty chart. For help in its preparation I am much indebted to Dr. A. K. Orlandos of the Greek Ministry of Education, and to Mr. O. J. Teegen of the School of Architecture, Harvard University.

³ *A. J. A.* 1897, pp. 313-332.

⁴ For the classification of the pottery see p. 5 below.

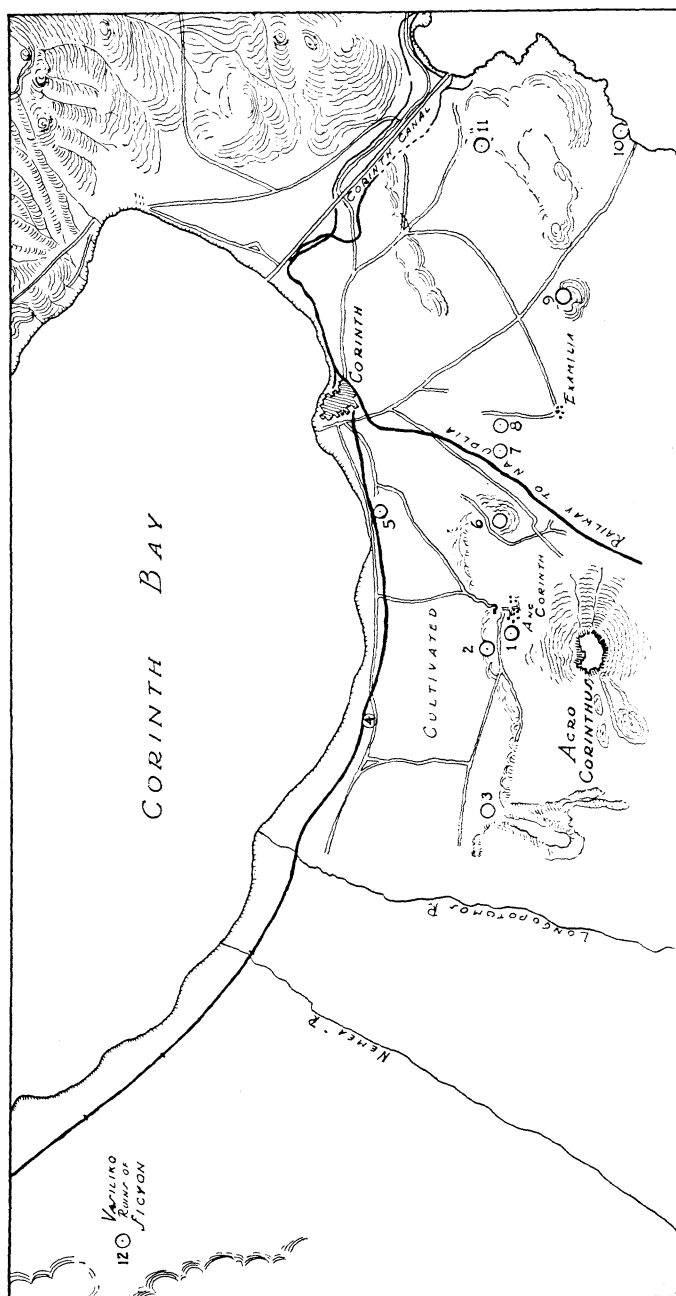


FIGURE 1.—PREHISTORIC SITES NEAR CORINTH.

Peirene, was destined to become the centre of classical Corinth. It is a noteworthy fact that no Mycenaean pottery—or at any rate only an insignificant number of sherds—has yet come to light at this site; but it should be observed that there has as yet been almost no investigation of the prehistoric deposit, and when the north side of the temple-hill is excavated, where the early stratification seems to be best preserved, it is by no means unlikely that Mycenaean remains will be found. Not much can be expected, however, for before the temple was built the top of the hill appears to have been irregularly shaved off, as a result of which in many places Greek deposit now rests directly on that of the Early Helladic Period. A more thorough cutting down of the hill occurred in the Roman period and, in consequence, to the north of the temple immediately below the bed of the Roman pavement we come upon Middle Helladic or even Early Helladic débris. It is to be hoped nevertheless that at some point the upper layer of the prehistoric stratum may be found undisturbed and there seems good reason to believe that it will demonstrate, just as proved to be the case at Troy, unbroken continuity of habitation.

2. About half a mile to the northwest of the temple of Apollo a ruined windmill known as “Mylos Cheliotou” crowns a small isolated hill at the edge of the upper plateau overlooking the plain to the north. Prehistoric potsherds comprising Early, Middle, and Late Helladic wares are scattered about this hill and its northern slope. The mound is thickly covered with débris showing evidence of continuous occupation from prehistoric down to recent times. A line of massive stones, projecting slightly above ground and traceable for a considerable distance, may belong to a prehistoric wall. Near by in a deep ravine to the south is a spring. No excavations have yet been made at this site.

3. Two miles to the west of Old Corinth a high circular cliff with flat top, standing conspicuously at the mouth of a deep ravine, bears the appropriate name “Aetopetra” or Eagle Rock (Fig. 2). It commands a splendid view of the fertile plain to the north and dominates an old road leading southward through the hills. One of the Mycenaean highways conjectured by Steffen¹ must have come down this ravine, passing just below the site. Many potsherds have been exposed by ploughing on the summit and others

¹ *Karten von Mykenai*, map.

may be gathered on the slope south of the cliff, among which Early, Middle, and Late Helladic fabrics are all well represented.

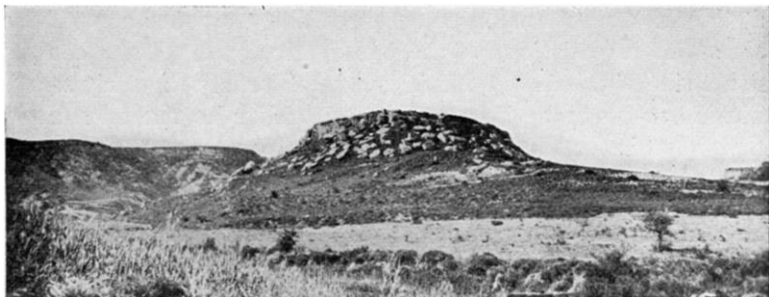


FIGURE 2.—AETOPETRA FROM THE NORTH.

A number of house walls also appear cropping out of the ground. Up to the present time there has been no excavation.

4. Near the shore of the Corinthian Gulf, somewhat more than a mile west of Lechaëum, is a slight elevation surmounted by a chapel of St. Gerasimus. In the field about the church Early Helladic sherds have been picked up in abundance, but no other fabrics have yet been observed. This site has not yet been excavated.

5. On a bluff named "Korakou," which juts out close to the sea at a point two-thirds of a mile east of Lechaëum and about two miles west of New Corinth, there is a low but conspicuous mound formed of the débris, etc., of successive prehistoric settlements (Fig. 3). Dr. Leaf is misinformed in asserting¹ that this



FIGURE 3.—KORAKOU FROM THE WEST.

¹ *Cl. R.* XXXII, 1918, p. 87.

site lies in the direction of Sicyon from ancient Corinth, for exactly the reverse is true. Korakou is situated about two and a half miles northeast of Old Corinth and is one mile more distant from Sicyon than is ancient Corinth itself (cf. map, Fig. 1). As a result of excavations carried on at this site a clear and undisturbed ceramic sequence has been brought to light, giving the basis for a division of the prehistoric period of southeastern Greece, subsequent to the Neolithic Age, into three main stages which we have designated the Early, Middle, and Late Helladic Periods respectively.¹ The Early Helladic Period has as its characteristic pottery the fabrics hitherto known chiefly as "urfirnis" wares; the Middle Helladic Period is distinguished by the use of Minyan and Mattpainted wares; and in the Late Hella-



FIGURE 4.—ARAPIZA FROM THE NORTH.

dic Period Mycenaean pottery is predominant. An important result of these excavations is the demonstration that the Mycenaean pottery of the mainland is a direct development of Minyan ware under progressively increasing Minoan influence. A full account of these excavations has been prepared for publication by the writer and will appear shortly.

6. A small prehistoric site has been discovered about a mile and a half east of Old Corinth at the north end of a ridge called "Arapiza" which lies just west of the carriage road from New Corinth to Argos (Fig. 4). Early and Middle Helladic sherds occur here and some Mycenaean ware has also been found. Arapiza is a small mound and probably not very important, but, standing near the chief line of communication between the Isth-

¹ This classification is briefly explained by Wace and Blegen, in *B. S. A.* XXII, pp. 175 ff.

mus and the Argolid, and affording a wide view of the Corinthian plain, it may mark the site of a military post. No excavations have yet been undertaken.

7. Half a mile directly north of the village of Examilia is a circular flat-topped elevation known as "Yiriza" which, rising

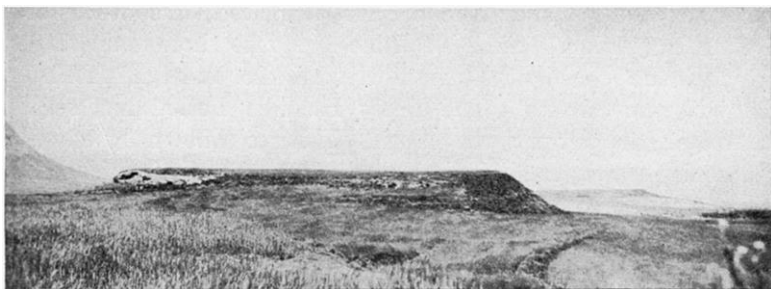


FIGURE 5.—YIRIZA FROM THE EAST.

steeply on all sides, forms a prominent feature of the landscape as viewed from the north (Fig. 5). Trial pits dug here in 1916 show that this site was occupied by a flourishing settlement throughout the Early Helladic Period, but no trace of subsequent habitation appeared.

8. A few hundred yards east of Yiriza and just above the road which leads from Examilia to New Corinth is an extensive pre-



FIGURE 6.—GONIA FROM THE NORTHEAST.

historic site (Fig. 6). It occupies a fairly broad but irregular ridge called "Gonia" which falls off steeply on all sides except for a short distance on the west where the slope is more gradual. A number of pits opened in 1916 yielded potsherds representing Neolithic, Early, Middle, and Late Helladic wares.

9. Traces of prehistoric occupation may be seen about one mile east of Examilia along the road to Cenchreae on a hill called "Perdikaria" with a precipitous northern edge. On one of the lower slopes stands a section of terrace wall built of huge stones in Cyclopean style (Fig. 7). This wall was observed in 1906 and



FIGURE 7.—CYCLOPEAN WALL AT PERDIKARIA.

a few Mycenaean potsherds were picked up. Minyan ware has also been found, as well as glazed ware of the Early Helladic Period, and a large quantity of obsidian. Perdikaria offers an admirable location for a settlement, controlling the road from Cenchreae and giving an extensive view toward the Saronic as well as the Corinthian Gulf. No digging has yet been attempted.

10. On the hill just above the northeast mole of the harbor of Cenchreae a few Early Helladic sherds have been found. This site bears evidence of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine occupation as a result of which neither the extent nor the duration of the prehistoric establishment can be determined without excavation. The situation is, however, a highly favorable one and it can

hardly be doubted that an important prehistoric settlement dominated the harbor of Cenchreae.

11. There is a prehistoric site at the Isthmus on the hill above the ruins of the stadium¹, but the cuttings in the rock described by Monceaux appear to date from occupation of the site in the early classical period. The prehistoric remains found here are up to the present time limited to a scanty number of sherds of Early Helladic ware.

Additional sites may yet be discovered by a more systematic exploration, and our knowledge of the prehistoric period will naturally be much enlarged when the sites already found are excavated; but the eleven settlements now known in the limited district about Corinth form a sufficiently striking commentary on the importance and the prosperity of the Isthmian region throughout the whole Bronze Age. Two of these settlements were inhabited in the Neolithic Period. All eleven appear to have flourished in the Early Helladic Period; seven were certainly occupied in the Middle Helladic Period; and six at least continued to exist until Late Helladic civilization was blotted out by the Dorian invasion. Two of the sites occupied in the Early Helladic Period and subsequently abandoned are very small and unimportant. Excavations will probably show that all the remaining settlements maintained their existence in the Middle and Late Helladic Periods.

The prosperity of this region was no doubt largely due to commerce. The results of the excavations at Korakou compared with finds from other points in the Aegean area make it clear that in the Early, Middle, and Late Helladic Periods alike, Corinth was consistently a centre of trade. There was at all times close communication with the Aegean and there were always very definite connections with Boeotia and Phocis to the north. In fact, Corinth seems to have been especially important as an intermediate station on a great trade route from the south to the north,—a route leading from the Argolid, from the Aegean, and even from Crete to the Isthmus and thence across the Corinthian Gulf to Thisbe whence it proceeded overland to Thebes and Orchomenos. The sea route was no doubt safer and certainly far easier than the difficult overland trail through the rugged passes of Mt. Geraneion. Relations with the west are also

¹ Monceaux, *Gazette Archéologique*, X, 1885, pp. 402-406.

evident and grow progressively stronger toward the end of the Bronze Age. Dr. Leaf is surely understating the case when he refers¹ disparagingly to the "trifling coasting traffic of the Gulf and the Four Islands at the mouth of it." We need only remind him that Greek Corinth had grown famous for her wealth and prosperity—dependent on just that traffic—long before she sent colonies to the far west in Sicily. So, too, in Mycenaean days the traffic up and down the Gulf of Corinth must certainly have been considerable and very profitable.

It is hardly necessary to explain here that this traffic was not carried on by large ships which require deep and spacious harbors with elaborately constructed quays. It was carried on by small and readily-handled sailing barks which could easily be drawn up on any sloping sandy beach. Just such a curving beach exists today at the foot of the mound of Korakou and one may often see the fishermen of modern Greece beach their Homeric-looking craft on those very sands. No traces of considerable harbor-works of the prehistoric period have yet been found at any point in Greece; and this in spite of the fact that all fresh discoveries have regularly tended to emphasize more and more the importance and the extent of prehistoric trade relations. Artificially constructed harbors were not essential to the commercial success of Mycenaean navigators; and we need no excavated port at Lechaëum to explain the prosperity of the Mycenaean settlement at Korakou.

Dr. Leaf, quoting from Philippson, paints the climatic conditions of Corinth in extremely dark colors.² To one who has lived there for months at a time and in all seasons of the year the picture is much distorted and exaggerated. Gales do indeed occur at intervals and the dust is sometimes distressing, but no more so than at a score of other places in Greece. On the other hand the regular sea breeze from the Gulf is highly beneficial in cooling the atmosphere in summer and makes many a hot day at Corinth endurable or even pleasant while Athens is sweltering in a calm. We may be perfectly sure that the climatic conditions of Corinth compared favorably with those of other places in the Atreid realm and did not discourage settlement about the Isthmus.

Again, in his estimate of the quality of the soil at Corinth, Dr. Leaf is no more fortunate in his quotation from the same German

¹ *Homer and History*, p. 212.

² *Homer and History*, p. 210.

authority. Indeed when he goes so far as to maintain¹ "there can be no better type of barrenness and desolation," no one familiar with Corinth can refrain from a smile of incredulity. It must be borne in mind that the plain between Corinth and Sicyon, famous in antiquity, and in modern times as well, for its richness and fertility, has the shape of an irregular crescent with a length of a dozen miles and a breadth of two to three. Corinth stands at the eastern, Sicyon at the western end, each roughly equidistant from the sea. Down through the middle of this productive plain, dividing it into two approximately equal parts, runs the Nemea River which in its deeply cut bed marks a natural boundary.² The territory to the east of this river belonged throughout historical times to Corinth; that to the west was Sicyonian. Each city thus possessed an equal share of the land which had become proverbial for its value. There is no evidence whatever to indicate that the boundary was different in prehistoric times. Dr. Leaf, however, apparently seizes the whole of the plain up to Lechaëum and the very gates of Corinth and confers it all on Sicyon. This is certainly improbable in the extreme and cannot be accepted for a moment. If an unequal division of the plain must be made it would seem, up to the present time at least, that Corinth with her numerous settlements was entitled to claim the major portion rather than Sicyon, where only one prehistoric site is yet known. This latter (Fig. 8) is a small site at the extreme end of the promontory jutting out to the east from the plateau on which stands the village of Vasiliko. It is numbered 12 on the map (Fig. 1).

But even though we understand Dr. Leaf's condemnation as being directed merely against the remnant of the territory still conceded to prehistoric Corinth, it is yet far from corresponding with the facts. The steep sides of Acrocorinth are, it must be admitted, both arid and stony, and here, it is true, "the wan blossoms of the asphodel" flourish abundantly in the springtime. But down below on the upper and lower plateau the soil, which is not excessively stony, is not below the average in productivity.

¹ *Op. cit.* p. 211.

² Two and one-half miles east of the Nemea River another stream, the Longopotamos, runs through the plain from south to north. It also has a deeply cut bed and would form a good natural boundary. The Nemea River is, however, the traditional frontier between Corinthia and Sicyonia (cf. Strabo, VIII, 6, 25). It does not affect the argument of this paper, whichever of the two be taken as the boundary.

In and about Old Corinth there are no less than a dozen springs¹ and market gardening is carried on as a very profitable enterprise. The fields about and below Old Corinth can be relied upon to produce good crops of wheat. On the upland rising toward Acrocorinth barley—and at present tobacco—is grown with success. The best land of all—on the lower plateau—is planted with currant vines which, until attacked by the phylloxera, yielded a



FIGURE 8.—PREHISTORIC SITE NEAR VASILIKO (SICYON).

regular and abundant harvest. According to statistics kindly furnished me by the president of the community of Old Corinth, the crop raised in 1918 in this small portion of the Corinthia amounted, apart from the usual abundance of asphodel, to the

¹ The most important of these springs are the following: (1) One-half mile east of the village is a good spring called "Kakavi." (2) One-quarter mile south of the temple of Apollo, issuing from the base of Acrocorinth, is the spring of "Hadji Mustapha" from which we get our drinking water. (3) At the eastern edge of the village is a copious spring called "Murat Aga." (4) About 200 yards farther west is a nameless spring beside a ruined mosque just below the carriage road. (5) In the centre of the village Peirene issues in three outlets: "Palukovrysi" in the plane-tree square, and the "Tsimpidi" and "Kachros" fountains some distance below. (6) By the paved road winding down the steep bluff directly north of the village is a fountain of which I do not know the name. (7) About 150 yards west of this fountain are the Baths of Aphrodite with a copious flow of water. (8) North of the quarter known as "Kutchuk Machala," and about 400 yards northwest of the temple of Apollo, is a spring which waters a large market garden. (9) One-half mile southwest of the temple, at "Anaploga," is a good spring. (10) A half mile west of the chapel of Hagia Paraskeve is a fountain called "Kokkinovrysi." (11) In a deep ravine south of the prehistoric site at "Cheliotomylos" (cf. p. 3 above) is a spring with a considerable amount of water. (12) Between "Cheliotomylos" and the Baths of Aphrodite, in a distance of rather more than half a mile, there are at least four separate springs which are used to irrigate flourishing market gardens.

following totals: wheat and barley (almost evenly divided) 600 tons; hay 700 tons;¹ dried currants 300 tons; tobacco 110,000 pounds; cheese 300,000 pounds; wine 50,000 gallons; olive oil 20,000 gallons. The yield of grain was exceptionally good that year but on the other hand the planting was very light—not much more than one-half the normal amount—owing to the shortage of seed.

Farther to the east in the neighborhood of Examilia the situation is the same. There are numerous springs and market gardens, one of which is noted for its orange groves and fruit trees. The lowland returns a good yield of currants, grapes, and wheat, while the upland and the hills ascending to the back of the Isthmus as well as the latter itself give a large return of barley.² And finally the higher hills including Acrocorinth, Mt. Oneion, and the Geranean range of Perachora provide excellent grazing ground for large herds of sheep and goats in consequence of which the manufacture of cheese is an important industry.

The Corinthia today maintains ten or a dozen villages with a rural population, not including New Corinth, of considerably more than 10,000. These villages are not only independently self-supporting in the matter of food supplies, but produce annually and market in New Corinth a fair amount of grain, large quantities of cheese, wine, and tobacco, and an average of 25,000,000 Venetian pounds of dried currants.³ A market of such proportions would seem in large part to justify the existence of the town of New Corinth. Dr. Leaf may attempt to discount the currant crop on the ground that the currant vine, being a Venetian importation, was unknown in prehistoric times; but one must not overlook the fact that the currant vineyards occupy the most productive land in the Corinthian district which was fully as fertile in antiquity as it is today. We may therefore safely conclude that Corinth in the prehistoric period, far from being a "type of barrenness and desolation," was, with its many springs and its desirable land, a highly attractive region for settlers, well able to sustain a considerable population.

Dr. Leaf's theory of the non-existence of Corinth in the Mycen-

¹ Hay in the Peloponnesus usually means barley which is cut green.

² Estimated total for 1918: 425 tons barley and 210 tons wheat.

³ The figure is taken from Inglezi's 'Οδηγὸς τῆς Ἑλλάδος. The Venetian pound, which is regularly used in the currant trade, is slightly heavier than the English pound.

aeon Period, as well as his conclusions based thereon, must accordingly be revised. Corinth was an important and flourishing region throughout the Bronze Age. Its geographical position made it a distributing centre of trade—a station of consequence on a great trade route from south to north. It included an attractive agricultural district by no means inferior to that of the Argolid in quality. The large number of inhabited sites makes it certain that the Mycenaean spirit of enterprise did not fail to exploit these natural advantages. The aggressive race of which Agamemnon was the head was not deterred by climatic conditions, nor even by the fear of disastrous earthquakes, from establishing itself firmly about the Isthmus. Indeed it may be more than a shrewd surmise that the King of men himself derived a considerable part of his royal income from the Isthmian trade. In conclusion, therefore, we are amply justified in taking Dr. Leaf at his word,¹ and expecting him to admit that he has used a faulty block as the corner stone of his theory.

CARL W. BLEGEN.

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¹ *Homer and History*, p. 214.